Were You There? Sermon Series
Sermon #6 – The Crowd
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Have you ever been stuck in an elevator? I was stuck once while going to a doctor's appointment. There were about 8 people in the elevator with me, on the way down from the 20th floor of the building. We didn't know each other, hadn't seen each other before, probably didn't have much in common. There was an African-American lady in a nurse's uniform, an elder Asian couple, a man in a lab coat. We were just strangers living our separate lives who happened to be in the same elevator.

Until it stopped. At that point, we stopped being a collection of strangers, and became a crowd, which is defined as a collection of people who share at least one significant trait. The trait this small crowd shared was that we were all stuck in the same elevator at the same time. From strangers to a group.

But our bonding didn't stop there. After about 30 seconds of non-movement, a guy in the back said, "What in the world is going on?" A lady responded, "I don't know, but they better hurry up and fix this." And then the murmuring started. "Yeah, what's their problem? Don't they know we're in here?" Tempers began to rise, faces were getting redder, the veins on their necks were standing out, even the sweet elderly couple had a scowl on their face. The nurse at the front began pounding on the door. "Hey, we're in here!" We all started shouting.

At that point, we stopped being a crowd and became a mob. A mob is defined as a crowd that is overrun with emotion and capable of doing things that none of the individuals would do under cooler circumstances. If this were a normal elevator ride, I wouldn't have pounded on the elevator wall. That would not have been well-received. But this was not a normal elevator ride. After another minute, the elevator kicked back to life, we all breathed a big sigh of relief, and when we got to the first floor, we all exited and went our separate directions, strangers once again with nothing in common but a possible case of elevator phobia.

The behavior of human groups is a fascinating study. While I was working on my communication degree a took a class in group dynamics, and it was so interesting to learn about how groups of people can take on a life of their own and do things that the individuals in the group would never choose to do on their own. Groups of people have incredible influence over those around them, and those inside them.

I believe some of that influence was being exerted during the events of Holy Week. There are two significant times where groups of people gathered: Palm Sunday, and the morning of Good Friday, outside of Pilate's house. The group that gathered on Palm Sunday was a crowd. The trait that bound them together was their enthusiasm for the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem. The excitement was high and they were all ecstatic about the arrival of this amazing miracle worker.

Word was spreading that Jesus could be the Messiah, and that had significant implications for the Jews living in Jerusalem. If that were true, then Jesus was arriving to take his place as the ruling King. Rome would be vanquished, the Jews would be vindicated, and God's kingdom would finally come here on earth. While this crowd was interested in Jesus, most of them were pursuing their own agendas; like those who came

to Jesus for healing, they only wanted him to meet their needs. As the people began shouting and waving palms, I imagine the crowd grew bigger and bigger. They probably even attracted some folks who had no idea what was going on. When you see a crowd of people standing around looking at something, doesn't your curiosity make you want to go over and see what they're looking at? Whether they cared or not, the crowd still shouted and chanted and spread their cloaks because, well, everyone else was doing it, and, like joining a conga line at a party, it seemed like the popular thing to do at the time.

But the crowd misunderstood Jesus, as they had been doing all through his ministry. They use the right words, but they miss the point of his purpose. "Hosanna!" means "God save us!" and Jesus was coming to save them, but not from Rome. He is a king, but his kingdom is even greater than the crowd dares to think. He was the Messiah, but as they were to find out as the week went on, not the Messiah they expected.

Now, fast-forward to Friday morning. This crowd that praised Jesus on Palm Sunday have heard him teach in the Temple, have watched him challenge their own religious leaders, have seen him arrested and beaten without lifting a finger to stop it. This was not what they were expecting. They wanted Palm Sunday Jesus: triumphant, exalted, entering the city like a king on his stallion. They had no use for Good Friday Jesus: bloody, beaten, humble, humiliated. They were angry. They were emotional. They were capable of doing things that individually they would never do, like call out for the crucifixion of an innocent man. Our crowd has now turned into a mob.

Pilate offers them a choice: he will either release Jesus or Barabbas, a freedom fighter who had committed murder. The choice seems obvious, doesn't it? Release a murderer or an innocent man. But sometimes a group of people can influence individuals to do things they don't wan to do.

I remember going to see a band in concert back in college. I didn't really care for the band, but my friend really liked them, and I didn't have anything else to do. The concert was by far the worst one I had ever seen. The sound was too loud, the band had no energy, and the room was a smoke-filled, foul-smelling cramped closet. The whole time I thought to myself, "I can't wait to get out of here!" When the band finished playing, a few people near me started yelling, "Encore! Encore!" At first I thought, "You've got to be kidding! I'm already deaf and probably have lung cancer from being here this long! " But more people started yelling, and those around me nudged me and said, "C'mon!" I found my mouth saying "Encore!" while my brain was saying, "Are you crazy?" The influence of a group can be strong.

That influence is what led the mob to call for the release of Barabbas, not Jesus. Why did they do that? They were stirred up by the religious leaders, and disillusioned about who this Jesus has turned out to be. I don't believe that everyone there that day wanted Jesus to die. But I didn't want an encore from that band, either. When the boisterous few began calling for his death, the chant was picked up by the crowd, maybe even by people who would have been satisfied with a less severe solution. A mob will do things that its individual members would never do on their own, and I believe that some of them present that day quietly acquiesced to the violent death of a man of peace, because it's easier to go along with the crowd and silence him than it is to deal with the repercussions if he's allowed to live and be heard.

In many ways that's the same choice we face today. To live in our culture means to be a part of many subcultures. When we claim allegiance with a group, we surrender

part of our personal identity. To say that I'm a Republican or a Democrat, a member of the PTO or Garden Club or an Internet chat board, is to say that, while I may not agree with every principle and value of that group, I will allow myself to be defined by that affiliation or allegiance. To say you're walking in the Breast Cancer Fundraiser says something about you; to say you're volunteering with the Boy Scouts says something about you. What do the groups you are a part of say about you? Do they honor your beliefs or challenge them? What do you do when you're forced to choose between an affiliation and your faith?.

The most difficult part of being in a group is taking a stand. It's so much easier to compromise and go along with the crowd than to go against the grain. But Christianity is about going against the grain; it's about letting our faith define us, not our affiliations or feelings. If we lived in a society that honored our beliefs and supported us in upholding them and living them out, this would not be an issue. But so often our beliefs are challenged or ignored by other groups of which we are a part, even by this culture in which we live. And then we must decide: do we stay silent for the good of the order, do we not rock the boat, or do we speak up, d we become the dissenting vote, the voice crying out in the wilderness, do we let Jesus continue to live in our lives, even if it means there are consequences?

The easiest decision, the most popular decision, the safest decision, isn't always the Christian decision. Each time we acquiesce to the will of the crowd over and against what God calls us to do, we once again cry "Crucify him!" A pastor friend told me once that we should let all our decisions be filtered through the God question: What is God calling me to do in this situation? Which choice will bring God the most glory? Each time we choose to honor God in our lives, even if it means not going along with the crowd, then we continue to let Christ's voice be heard.

We are a lot of things: we are board members, we are activists, we are club members, we are employees, we are residents, we are taxpayers, we are a part of many crowds. But no matter how else we are identified, first and foremost, we are Christians. We are Christians.